



## Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

### Instructional Office Newsletter

## WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL YEAR 2019-2020

September 2019

Volume 7, Issue # 1

### Ice-Breaking and Norm-Setting in the First Week of School

"Where do I sit?" is many students' anxious question as they enter a classroom for the first time. In this article in *Education Week Teacher*, Arizona teacher Sandy Merz describes how he used seating assignments for maximum benefit over the first five days of the year. His middle-school classroom had five large tables seating a total of 32 students. In preparation for these days, he labeled each seat with a number.

• **Day 1** – Merz greets students at the door, makes sure they're in the right classroom, and directs them to follow the posted instructions: *Sit in birthday order so the person with the birthday closest to January 1st sits in Seat 1. The year you were born doesn't matter. Don't skip seats. When everyone is seated, the student in Seat 5 raises his or her hand to report that the class is ready to begin.* Merz observes the interactions as students grapple with a routine they've never seen before: who are the organizers, refusers and disrupters, the active and passive participants? By the time the activity is finished, students will have interacted with a number of classmates in a safe, nonthreatening way, and the lesson can begin.

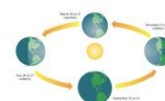
• **Day 2** – Merz posts these instructions: *Line up in alphabetical order by the name you like to be called. Use last names and then middle names as tie-breakers. Then sit with an equal number of students at tables 1-4. Remaining students sit at Table 5. When all are seated, the last student raises his or her hand and reports that the class is ready.*

(Continued on page 2)

### IMPORTANT DATES

September 2<sup>nd</sup>  
September 3<sup>rd</sup>  
September 8<sup>th</sup>  
September 11<sup>th</sup>  
September 17<sup>th</sup>  
September 23<sup>rd</sup>

LABOR DAY  
1<sup>st</sup> Student Day  
Grandparents Day  
Patriot Day  
Constitution Day  
First Day of Fall  
begins @ 3:50am  
Autumn Equinox  
Rosh Hashanah (begins at  
sundown)



### IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

**D**ue to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!





(Continued from page 1)

“Adjusting to have an equal number at each table produces a lot of interaction and some tension,” says Merz. “Watch closely how students with different ideas negotiate. Don’t intervene with the answer, but mediate if necessary. Have students quickly report out their names. Treat alphabetizing mistakes kindly, of course.”

• **Day 3** – Merz hands students a card that says: *Read this card completely. Do not enter the room until you understand the instructions. You may talk about the instructions before you enter the room. When you understand the instructions, give the card back to Mr. Merz, enter the room, and begin.* The card’s instructions (are also posted in the classroom):

- **Complete this challenge in complete silence. Remain silent for the entire activity. Do not talk or whisper after you enter the room.**
- **In the room, line up in order by height.**
- **Then take your seats with the shortest person in Seat 1.**
- **Do not skip seats.**
- **When the class is seated, the student in seat 12 raises his or her hand, and when called on, reports that the class is ready.**



“Although the task is easy,” says Merz, “the silent rule adds some stress, so observe which defense mechanisms students display. Note who is comfortable reading the cards and who avoids the task.”

• **Day 4** – The posted instructions: *Sort yourselves into two groups: sneaker wearers and non-sneaker wearers. Next, each group forms two subgroups: students with curly hair and those with straight hair. (You have curly or straight hair if you think you do.) Each sub-group finds enough chairs and sits in order from the person with the shortest hair to the person with the longest hair.* (A tree diagram with the groups might be helpful.)

• **Day 5** – The instructions: *Form two groups: students who prefer to spend free time indoors and those who prefer to spend it outdoors. You may like both, but choose just one. Within those groups, define your own subgroups based on the last thing you did*

*when you spent free time the way you wanted to.* Find a place to sit together and talk about your free-time activity.

By the time these daily 10-15-minute activities are completed, says Merz, “you will have a good idea about how your classes will function and have a sense of the key players and personalities... And by training students to rely on each other and work together, you’ve demonstrated your norms rather than explaining them.”

“Teaching Secrets: Get to Know Students Through Seating Challenges” by Sandy Merz in Education Week Teacher, June 27, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2MZGMI6> (see the lively responses to the article online); Merz can be reached at [smmerz@azk12.org](mailto:smmerz@azk12.org).

## Jennifer Gonzalez on Getting to Know Students

In the first of these two *Cult of Pedagogy* articles, Jennifer Gonzalez describes her growing frustration with a particular seventh-grade boy. His squirrely behavior was getting on her nerves, and she responded with reprimands and lunch detention. But then the guidance counselor mentioned that the boy’s family was homeless and had been living in a shelter for the last two months. “At that moment,” says Gonzalez, “I realized I didn’t really know my students at all.” After shifting her approach with this boy, she decided to be much more systematic about building relationships with her students at the beginning of each school year. Here’s what she recommends:

• **Part 1: Break the ice.** Of course not all icebreakers are effective, says Gonzalez. Some ask students to take massive social risks with peers they don’t know very well; some don’t actually facilitate familiarity; and some are cheesy. Here are three she has found to be effective:

### ➤ **Lines and Blobs**

– Students are asked to line up in alphabetical order by their first names; line up in alphabetical order by their last names; gather with people who have the same eye color; gather with people who get to school in the same way (car, bus, bike, skateboard, walk); line up in





order of birthdays; line up in order of how many languages they speak; gather in three blobs: those who have lots of chores at home, a few, or none; gather with people who have the same favorite season. With these activities, says Gonzalez, students quickly discover things they have in common, don't have to come up with anything clever, and are on their feet, moving, and talking.

➤ **Concentric Circles –**



Students get into two equal circles, one inside the other, face a classmate in the other circle and each pair answers a get-to-know-you question, then rotates

clockwise/counterclockwise to the next person and repeats the process. Some possible questions: Do you play any sports? If so, which ones? Do you consider yourself shy or outgoing? Why? What is the last movie you saw? Did you like it? Describe your perfect dinner. What would you do with a million dollars? What is one thing you're good at? This activity generates lots of one-to-one conversations and helps students quickly feel at home in the classroom.

➤ **This or That –** The teacher poses a question (for example, Which animal makes a better pet, a dog or a cat?) and students move to a corner of the room with people who have the same opinion and talk about why they made that choice. "This game has always been a huge hit with any group I've ever taught," says Gonzalez: "It builds student confidence with talking in front of their peers, it helps students quickly find kindred spirits, and it's also just a lot of fun." Other possible questions: Would you rather live in the country or the city? Should all students be required to learn a second language? Which is worse, bad breath or body odor? Would you rather be indoors or outdoors? Which is better, playing sports or watching sports? Would you rather travel every single day or never leave home?

• **Part 2: Take inventory.**



Gonzalez has students fill out an information sheet that includes questions on favorite music, books, hobbies, and sports, also health and allergy issues, technology they have at home, whether they divide their time between two households, responsibilities inside and outside their home, and what's competing for their time. It's also important to confirm how to pronounce students' names and what they prefer to be called.

• **Part 3: Store the data.** Gonzalez recommends creating a spreadsheet to make it easy to access the information (students' names are on the vertical axis, key information on the other – for example, passions, family, pets, activities, academics, food and drink, skills, miscellaneous). Having all this information for each class is helpful to differentiate or jazz up a particular lesson or just to refresh one's memory on students who are flying under the radar.

• **Part 4: Check in with students.** Gonzalez recommends doing at least one more survey during the year, asking different questions – how are things going for them, how they feel about class procedures and rules, whether assignments seem fair, and how challenged they feel. She also recommends throwing in open-ended questions like, "What would you like to see more of in this class?" and "What else should I know?" (See the first article link below for questionnaires she's created.)

"A 4-Part System for Getting to Know Your Students" by Jennifer Gonzalez in *The Cult of Pedagogy*, July 10, 2016, and "Icebreakers That Rock" by Jennifer Gonzalez, July 23, 2015, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/relationship-building/> and <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/>



## Getting Sight Words to Stick in Students' Minds

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Amanda Rawlins and Marcia Invernizzi (University of Virginia)





understand the frustration of kindergarten teachers when students are slow to learn sight words: *I just taught this word yesterday! You're seen this word at least 20 times this week!*

Ideally, 100 sight words are mastered by first grade – words whose pronunciation and meaning students recognize immediately, without having to sound them out. Recognizing these words is foundational to reading proficiency: “Automatic word reading, or sight word reading, gives students the gas in the tank to propel the reading machine forward,” say Rawlins and Invernizzi. They have the following suggestions for getting sight words to stick in students’ minds:



- ❖ ***Recognize that sight words aren't learned just by sight.*** In fact, the term “sight words” is misleading, suggesting that students are going to learn them just by looking at them. In fact, high-frequency words need to be taught systematically, unpacking their sounds, spelling, and meaning.
- ❖ ***The easiest-to-remember words are concrete, including nouns high in imagery, evocative adjectives, and action verbs.*** Rawlins and Invernizzi recommend focusing on words like *cat, coat, food, run, hop, sit, jump, sleep, walk, play, little, white, happy, and fat* and not words like *hope, love, fear, use, think, work, try, seem, gave, bring, should, some, odd, and able*. In addition, words like *I, to, and the*, even though they're very common, are more abstract and not the best candidates to be sight words.
- ❖ ***Choose sight words from texts students are reading.*** High-frequency lists have a lot of function words – prepositions, articles, and pronouns; they're the glue that holds together more-meaningful words. But these aren't the

best sight words to teach; better to teach meaning-heavy words in the context of stories, and come back to them frequently.

- ❖ ***Students will remember words when their sounds, spelling, and meaning are taught together.*** The amalgamation of these three dimensions, repeated in and out of context, will get words into students' long-term memory.
- ❖ ***Teaching sight words requires a range of instructional activities geared to students' level of word knowledge.*** Rawlins and Invernizzi believe that drilling words with flashcards is not the best approach. Teachers need to assess where students are in terms of letter, word, and sentence knowledge, systematically teach well-chosen high-frequency words, and have students practice them in and out of context.

“Reconceptualizing Sight Words: Building an Early Reading Vocabulary” by Amanda Rawlins and Marcia Invernizzi in *The Reading Teacher*, May/June 2019 (Vol. 72, #6, p. 711-719),  
<https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/trt.r.1789>; the authors can be reached at [arr2fj@virginia.edu](mailto:arr2fj@virginia.edu) and [mai@virginia.edu](mailto:mai@virginia.edu).



## What Schools Can Do to Reduce Student Stress

(Originally titled “The Teens Are Not Alright”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Cathy Vatterott (University of Missouri/St. Louis) bemoans the psychological state of U.S. adolescents, especially in high-performing schools. “However they got there,” says Vatterott, “whether from the influence of parents, peers, society, or the school, the kids are not alright...



Why are so many teens stressed out and disheartened at a time in their lives when they should be happy and carefree?" Teens need to:

- ✦ Experience learning as joyful and exciting.
- ✦ Read for pleasure.
- ✦ Play a game where winning doesn't matter.
- ✦ Figure out who they are and what they value.
- ✦ Fall in love, not with a person, but with a passion.
- ✦ Discover not what the world can do for them, but what they can do for the world.
- ✦ Reflect, wonder, and dream.

Vatterott suggests some steps schools can take to bring more of these into students' lives:

- **Limit homework.** One survey found that only 20-30 percent of students find homework "useful or meaningful," yet it ranked as the top stressor. Studies have shown that there's no benefit to more than an hour of homework a day in middle school and two hours in high school. Some schools have dialed back to these levels, banned weekend homework, limited how much homework counts to as little as 5 percent of grades, and scheduled final exams before the Christmas break. There's also an increased focus on improving the quality of homework assignments so they are a meaningful part of daily lessons.



- **Coordinate the workload across classes.** Vatterott says it's common for a student to have six or more teachers assigning homework and scheduling projects and exams without consulting each other. **Using a coordinated calendar or deciding to have all math homework or tests on Tuesdays, ELA homework on Wednesdays, etc., makes a big difference.**

- **Rethink the schedule.** Students who juggle 6-8 classes a day with five-minute passing times are bound to be frazzled. Far saner is a modified block schedule with four courses a day, and other variations featuring fewer, longer classes each day.

- **Share important information.** Students and parents can benefit from well-run workshops on

homework, GPAs, AP courses, college choices, sleep, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, and suicide prevention.

"The Teens Are Not Alright" by Cathy Vatterott in *Educational Leadership*, May 2019 (Vol. 76, #8, p. 12-16), <https://bit.ly/2YedA5c>; Vatterott can be reached at [vatterott@umsl.edu](mailto:vatterott@umsl.edu).

## Does Civic Education Make a Difference?

In this article in the *Peabody Journal of Education*, David Campbell (University of Notre Dame) analyzes what social scientists have learned about civics instruction in U.S. secondary schools. His conclusion: handled well, civic education can have a positive effect on young people's "active citizenship in a democratic society." Some possible ways this can manifest itself: participating in debates and discussions; speaking up at community meetings; volunteering in the community; participating in civic or political activities; working on a political or issue campaign; participating in a demonstration or boycott; and, of course, voting.

But for a long time, the assumption among scholars was that civics classes made no difference. An influential article published in 1968 (Langston and Jennings) said that teaching civics had little to no effect on political knowledge, interest, attitudes, and discourse, or on media consumption, civic participation, sense of efficacy, and tolerance. The good news, says Campbell, is that recent research has established that civics courses can have a positive effect. Here are the key variables:

✓ **Classroom instruction** – Civics classes make a difference, he says, when there is an "open classroom climate," defined as an atmosphere "in which students are exposed to the enlivening discussion of political and social issues, are encouraged to share their own opinions, and have their opinions respected by the teacher." Effective teachers steer away from textbook reading and worksheets and involve students in discussing current events, researching political issues, engaging in classroom debates, role-playing, and writing letters to elected officials. Campbell mentions three programs that have produced good results: We The People, Student Voices, and Kids Voting.

✓ **Extracurricular activities** – Researchers have found that when students take part in student council, service organizations, drama clubs, musical groups,





and religious organizations, they get a “civic boost” after graduation (he notes that athletics are not on this list). There are two caveats: first, there is a socioeconomic skew in the availability of many extracurricular activities, with disadvantaged students having fewer options; second, it’s possible that students who are predisposed to civic activism are attracted to these activities; correlation is not causation. More research is needed, says Campbell.

✓ **Service learning** – The research in this area is not as strong, but in some cases taking part in school-sponsored service projects boosts students’ downstream civic engagement.

✓ **School ethos** – Some studies have shown that the values reinforced within a school, either explicitly or implicitly, have an impact on students’ future civic engagement. One study (Bruch and Soss, 2018) found that adolescents in schools with punitive discipline policies, who believed their teachers treated them unfairly, were less likely to vote as young adults and had less trust in government. Students of color are generally more likely to bear the brunt of punitive school discipline, which means that schools may (say the authors) “operate as institutional mechanisms that convert social hierarchies into predictable patterns of political inequality and civic marginalization.”

Other studies have found that in schools that foster trust and positive beliefs, the opposite is true, especially when teachers explicitly endorse the importance of voting. The Democracy Prep charter schools in New York City send students as young as kindergarten to campaign for voter registration in Harlem (their bright yellow T-shirts say *I can’t vote, but you can!*); have high-school seniors work all year on capstone “Change the World” projects focused on key social problems; and require students to pass the U.S. Citizenship Test before graduating. Follow-up studies have found that Democracy Prep graduates are significantly more likely to vote than students who applied but weren’t admitted to the school through the lottery process.

✓ **High-stakes testing** – States that have introduced a high-school civics test as a graduation requirement show higher levels of civic knowledge among graduates, especially Latinx students and

immigrants.

Campbell says that when high schools successfully increase their students’ *civic awareness and participation*, the benefits are most significant among students of color. He believes this is because the school’s impact compensates for more skeptical messages students may be receiving at home. It’s possible, he says, that effective civics programs in schools may have a “trickle-up” effect, changing patterns of civic engagement in students’ families.

**“What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature” by David Campbell in Peabody Journal of Education, April 2019 (Vol. 94, #1, p. 32-47),**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601>; Campbell can be reached at [dave\\_campbell@nd.edu](mailto:dave_campbell@nd.edu).



## Not Making Unreasonable Behavioral Demands of Students

“Children aren’t just smaller versions of adults,” says Arkansas teacher Justin Minkel in this article in *Education Week Teacher*. “They are their own kind of being. They need to move, talk, question, and explore more than we do, because they’re in the midst of that mind-boggling explosion of cognitive, physical, and social-emotional growth that marks childhood in our species.” Because of this, he believes there are four things teachers should not ask students to do:

- **Silent passing** – Some schools have a no-talking rule when students walk through the hallways, ostensibly to avoid disturbing work in other classrooms. But students may wonder why it’s okay for teachers to chat with colleagues as they walk around the school, and may have noticed that what are truly distracting is teachers loudly reprimanding students outside classrooms.
- **Sitting still for a long time** – Teachers who shadow students for a day are often struck by how uncomfortable, even exhausting, it is to be sedentary for an entire class period. It’s even worse when students are listening passively to “teacher talk.” Minkel suggests a guideline for the length of teachers’ lectures: students’ age –







that is, five minutes for kindergarten, 15 minutes for high-school sophomores. In addition, students need to get up and move, which can take the form of organized movement breaks [see the following article] or class rules that allow students to get up to sharpen a pencil or get a book.

- **Forced apologies** – “I’ve definitely been guilty of this one,” says Minkel, but he’s come to realize that when an angry child is told to say, “I’m sorry,” the apology isn’t sincere and won’t be received as such. “Turbulent emotions take a long time to settle,” he says. “We need to give kids time.”
- **Zero tolerance for forgetfulness** – Adults forget as well, says Minkel, and we need to take a deep breath and cut students some slack.

“4 Things Teachers Shouldn’t Be Asking Their Students to Do” by Justin Minkel in Education Week Teacher, April 8, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZafCEO>

## Teaching Students the Skills of Reading and Writing Online



“Although educators increasingly acknowledge the importance of preparing students for their online lives, they do not necessarily teach these skills,” says Mary Hoch, Ryan McCarty, Debra Gurvitz, and Ivy Sitkoski (National Louis University) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. The authors (citing Leu et al., 2015) believe reading and writing online diverges from paper-based literacy through greater emphasis on:

- ✚ Reading to define questions;
- ✚ Reading to critically evaluate online information;
- ✚ Reading to synthesize information;
- ✚ Reading to communicate information;
- ✚ Composing that combines sound, video, image, and text;
- ✚ Integrating online and paper-based sources.

Based on 50 teachers’ intensive work with

struggling students in grades 3-11 in a summer reading program, the authors suggest five principles for developing students’ reading and writing skills with digital media:

- **Motivate and engage students.** Teachers made a point of tapping into students’ curiosity, interests, and social interactions to spark intrinsic motivation in what they read online. Teachers also worked to scaffold difficult material, make students increasingly independent, and wean them from the idea that questions need one right answer.

- **Modulate levels of difficulty.** Teachers chose texts that were easy (independent level), just-right (instructional level), and hard (borderline frustration), and used a combination of independent reading and read-alouds to engage and challenge students. Reading on screens was difficult for some students, and teachers found they needed to show some students how to scroll and manipulate font sizes.

- **Frame instruction as inquiry.** Teachers posed challenging questions and got students to generate their own questions. Some examples:

- ✓ Why do inventors invent?
- ✓ Is football safe?
- ✓ Is technology good or bad?
- ✓ How are we connected to the Earth?
- ✓ Can cartoons teach us lessons?

Questions like these spurred online exploration, student engagement, and higher-quality work.

- **Support student synthesis.** Students needed the most support with this skill (the authors like Keene’s and Zimmerman’s definition: “organizing the different pieces to create a mosaic, a meaning greater than the sum of each shiny piece,” 2007). Scaffolding included highlighting, color coding, sticky notes, and graphic organizers to help organize information. Online tools like Padlet <https://padlet.com> were also helpful.

- **Write for an authentic audience.** Students worked with teachers to design a writing task based on what they wanted to share with an online audience, choosing graphics, hyperlinks, illustrations, and charts as appropriate. Students then posted their work on the summer program’s Kidblog site, which linked them to other sites – which was highly motivating.





“Five Key Principles: Guided Inquiry with Multimodal Text Sets” by Mary Hoch, Ryan McCarty, Debra Gurvitz, and Ivy Sitkoski in *The Reading Teacher*, May/June 2019 (Vol. 72 #6, p. 689-699), <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1781>; the authors can be reached at [mary.hoch@nl.edu](mailto:mary.hoch@nl.edu), [rmccarty@nl.edu](mailto:rmccarty@nl.edu), [debra.gurvitz@nl.edu](mailto:debra.gurvitz@nl.edu), and [isitkoski@nl.edu](mailto:isitkoski@nl.edu).

## Fair and Unfair Grading Practices



In this *School Administrator* article, Joe Feldman (Crescendo Education Group) says he often asks groups of educators what the final grade should be for two students who received these grades (in sequence) for assignments and homework during a curriculum unit:

- Student A: 64, 70, 78, 90, 98
- Student B: 94, 97, 96, 100, 97

Most people get out their calculators and find the average, saying the first student should get an 81 and the second a 97 – in other words, a B- and an A. But averaging the grades is a problematic approach, says Feldman. The first student started the unit at a much lower place, perhaps because of prior instruction or home disadvantages, but by the end of the unit, had achieved mastery (assuming the final assessment was cumulative). Looked at this way, both students deserve an A.

“It should be clear,” says Feldman, “how averaging performance over time would discourage students who struggle early and who are daunted by the challenge of salvaging their low initial performance. When students receive poor grades early on, they may see the hill to redemption as too steep and simply give up.”

Averaging grades is one of a number of unfair grading practices Feldman sees in his work with schools and districts. Some others: major variations in the grades that different teachers give for the same test or assignment; teacher-to-teacher differences in how tests, homework, effort, extra-credit work, participation, and other factors are counted; grades that don’t show students’ progress, mastery, or areas of difficulty.

Feldman advocates for practices that he believes will level the playing field and improve both teaching and learning:

- Grade on a zero-to-4 scale.
- Weight more-recent performance more heavily in final grades.
- Base final grades on summative, not formative, assessments.
- Base grades on individual achievement, not a group’s work.
- Base grades on required content, not extra credit.
- Don’t include class participation and effort in grades.
- Allow students to re-take assessments.
- Use rubrics with which students can self-assess during instruction.

Feldman reports that implementing these ideas results in major decreases in students receiving D’s and F’s (especially students of color and students with disabilities); less grade inflation; grades that more accurately reflect student achievement; overall improvement in grades; less stress in classrooms; and improved student-teacher relationships.

“Equitable Grading: Tales of Three Districts” by Joe Feldman in *School Administrator*, May 2019 (Vol. 76, #5, p. 38-41), <https://bit.ly/2Y9kEAg>; Feldman can be reached at [joe@crescendoedgroup.org](mailto:joe@crescendoedgroup.org).

